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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN BRINGS NAGORNO-KARABAKH ISSUE TO UNESCO

REF: PARIS FR 01454

¶1. Summary. After a series of acrimonious exchanges with Armenia in the General Debate at UNESCO's 35th General Conference, Azerbaijan won a small victory by including wording in the 2010 Program and Budget calling for the "implementation of necessary measures to safeguard and preserve cultural heritage in countries in conflict, particularly in occupied territories." UNESCO staff assure us they have no intention of involving themselves in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, but the fact remains that Azerbaijan has succeeded in getting its issue included in UNESCO's strategic plan. We anticipate Azerbaijan will seek other opportunities to inject its dispute with Armenia into future meetings of UNESCO's Executive Board and General Conference. End Summary.

INITIAL SKIRMISHES

¶2. Azerbaijan succeeded in raising its dispute with Armenia at UNESCO's just concluded 35th General Conference in Paris. Aware that Azerbaijan had submitted a budget amendment referring to its dispute with Armenia, Armenia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, in his opening remarks trumpeted Armenia's long history and cultural accomplishments, noted "excellent cooperation" with Iran including Iran's preservation of the St. Thaddeus Monastery and highlighted Armenia's cooperation in preserving a 17th Century Persian Mosque in Yerevan. In contrast, he declared "this positive experience is not reciprocated by our other neighbors. As a result of the policy of destruction of the Armenian historical heritage, thousands of cultural monuments that were of universal value, have been lost forever." The Minister then went on to name specifics including the "annihilation" of the Jugha Cemetery and the demolition of a 7th century Armenian Church in Nakhichevan. He then called on UNESCO to "stand up to the challenge of unabated violations of cultural rights..."

¶3. Not to be outdone, Azerbaijan's Minister of Education stated that one-fifth of the country is occupied and that 900 libraries, 700 schools, 9 mosques, 26 museums and many cultural sites and cemeteries had been destroyed as the result of Armenian aggression. Moreover, Azeris whose families had lived for centuries in territory controlled by Armenia, had been forced into exile, the Minister said.

AZERBAIJAN WINS IN THE CULTURE COMMISSION

¶4. This exchange in the opening debate was followed by discussion of Azerbaijan's proposed amendment to UNESCO's 2010-2011 Program and Budget which called for the "implementation of necessary measures to safeguard and preserve cultural heritage in countries in conflict, particularly in occupied territories." The Azeri delegation had originally proposed to insert this language into programs related to the 1972 World Heritage Convention. Enough delegations, including the United States, objected and the proposal was deflected into a program relating to the operation of the 1954 Hague Convention for the protection of cultural property in time of armed conflict.

15. Comment: Azerbaijan is a member of UNESCO's Executive Board and has for some time been trying to find a way to inject its dispute with Armenia into UNESCO's proceedings. Even though UNESCO staff tell us privately that they have absolutely no intention of doing anything to implement the language Azerbaijan put into the strategic plan, the fact remains that it is there and that Azerbaijan and other states who claim they have territory under foreign military occupation can argue that UNESCO should be trying to protect cultural property in the areas allegedly under occupation. The door thus is open a crack for what could be highly political discussions under the guise of cultural preservation. We would not be surprised if Azerbaijan were to look for other opportunities to raise its dispute with Armenia at future UNESCO Executive Board and General Conference sessions. End Comment.

KILLION